Vanholsbeeck's lab group.

Courtesy of Frederique Vanholsbeeck

REFLECTIONS IN DIVERSITY

A Journey to Equity and Diversity

A look at a New Zealand university's efforts to make its physics department welcoming and fair to all.

Frederique Vanholsbeeck

When I began my career at the physics department at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, in 2005, I was its only female academic staff member. At the time I was completely oblivious to any gender issues, but I quickly realized that something needed to be done.

Numerous studies portray the lack of equity in academia—especially in STEM, with physics among the worst offenders. The main culprits are gender bias and the lack of role models in underrepresented groups. These factors constitute the "chicken and egg" of equity; gender bias holds back faculty diversity, in turn leading to the lack of role models.

Bias demonstrably affects every aspect of an academic career—from receiving grants to citation of papers—and is thus an important problem to curb in making a workplace more diverse and equitable. Another important aspect of equity is hidden privilege, such as differences in the availability and clarity of information accessible to staff. Here, I focus on the University of Auckland initiatives I've been involved

with that I believe have helped most in making our workplace more open and diverse.

Charting a course

I came to this work via a focus group on women returning to the workforce after childbirth, after having my first child. The professional and academic staff in the group had varied experiences with parental leave. The group's work led to the launch of a website (http://ow.ly/FYml30bDpZw) that included information and a toolkit for combining parenting and a career, and that shared best practices and flexible working options. The project acknowledges that men and women both face issues when trying to combine parenting with career—for instance, that both male and female staff should take their nine-week fully paid parental leave.

Another important milestone in our department's journey came in early 2015 with the creation of its Equity Working Group. As members of the first university department to have such a working group, we opted to begin with resources that were already available to keep our time involvement reasonable.

In particular, our approach to data gathering and monitoring aligns with the main equity schemes made popular by the Athena SWAN Charter scheme (see "The Times They Are a-Changin'," OPN, April 2015, p. 16) from the U.K.'s Equality Challenge Unit, and Project Juno from the U.K.'s Institute of Physics. These schemes are relatively recent and have slowly taken off in other countries. Unfortunately, no similar schemes exist in New Zealand, so we went as a "free electron." Our working group seeks to raise awareness and change the culture in our department by gathering evidence, implementing actions and monitoring successes.

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> —*Frederique Vanholsbeeck*

A department-wide effort

To gather data, we proceeded on two fronts. First, a staff survey based on Project Juno models, with a Likert-scale system for quantitative data and room for more qualitative write-in comments, provided baseline data on the equity barriers of our department. (The survey will repeat every two years.) Second, we analyzed student data on enrollment patterns and pathways of undergraduates taking physics, to learn how the department might improve retention and recruitment of diverse students and provide them with an unbiased environment (see this analysis at https://arxiv.org/abs/1702.06249). The analysis of these data sources led to three recommendations for the department, regarding mentoring new staff, documenting processes, and monitoring a wide range of data—from hiring staff to the selection of summer scholarships or colloquium speakers.

Now, in monthly departmental meetings, each committee (including the physics Equity Working Group) provides regular updates that help achieve two goals. First, decision making becomes more inclusive and transparent. Second, the regular updates raise the profile of the Equity Working Group, putting equity on the same level as concerns such as research, teaching, and health and safety. Pragmatically speaking, everyone now hears about diversity and equity at least once a month, so more people take ownership of the equity project or at least some of its aspects.

Developing and implementing a training and mentoring process for new staff is essential to our mission. A "welcome" leaflet provides clear documentation of current procedures and processes, and identifies areas for improvement, providing a base level of awareness to allow current staff to properly train new staff. In addition, a more structured, less ad hoc mentoring scheme is under development. I have been both a mentee and mentor, and view mentorship as an invaluable experience that truly benefits both parties.

In our department, further training is available on gender biases. Though any member of a selection committee must undergo bias training, we hold a session on gender bias every year for our graduate and doctorate cohorts to continue the discussion around equity and diversity. Partly as a result of these efforts (as

well as staff encouraging women to apply for open positions), in the past two years the department has hired more women than ever before.

Also important is the creation of a child care policy. This is the perfect example of a cost-effective policy that requires little implementation time. Spending a small amount on child care per year can allow junior staff to more readily attend important conferences or networking functions.

Effort reaps rewards

For physics students, we've established a scholarship with a strong emphasis going to those in underrepresented groups. Though the scholarship stipend is modest, it comes with some mentoring and is financially comparable to the average earnings of part-time working students. These aspects are imperative for students from underrepresented groups who may lack financial resources or role models. Along with the study of our undergraduate pathways, we closely monitor our graduate cohorts as they grow more diverse; at present, 35 percent of doctorate students, for example, are female. And we now have students who openly identify as transgender and gender diverse—a sign that our department is an increasingly inclusive space for staff and students.

Finally, with the help of colleague J.J. Eldridge, a member of the Astronomical Society of Australia, our department's efforts were acknowledged with the Bronze Pleiades Award, an annual award from the society's Inclusion, Diversity and Equity Chapter that recognizes a commitment to advance women and diversity in the field. I believe that other professional societies should implement similar awards or international benchmarks that recognize workplace equity.

The initiatives described here—run by committed individuals, but supported by a growing number of staff members and a formal working group—continue to change the face of our department. We would be happy to share any resources those interested in undertaking this journey. OPN

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